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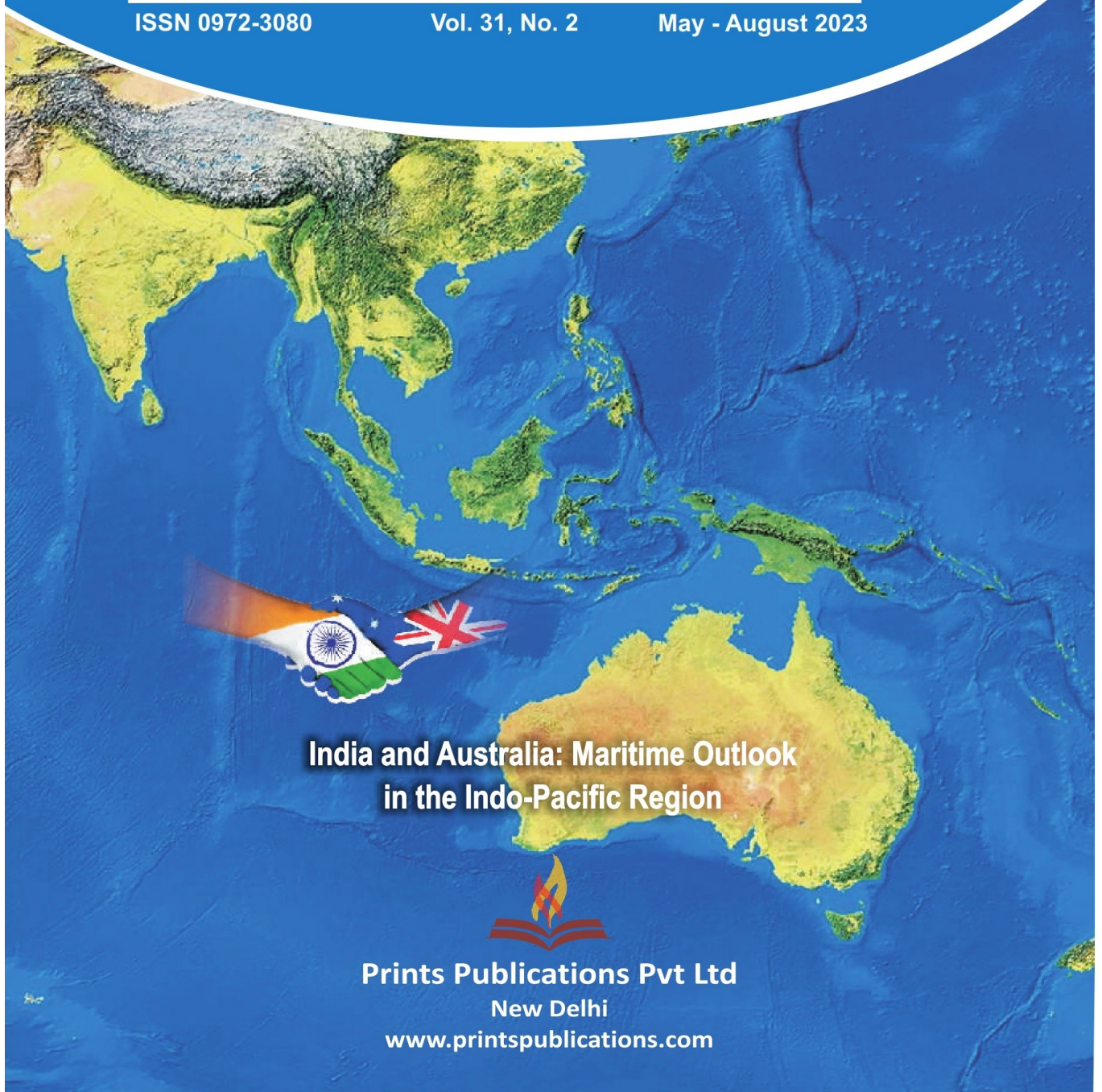
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**India and Australia: Maritime Outlook  
in the Indo-Pacific Region**



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## ***India-Australia Maritime Outlook in the Realm Indo-Pacific***

GG Dwivedi\*

### **Introduction**

The Indo-Pacific as a geo-political construct has emerged as a substitute for the erstwhile Asia-Pacific, signifying the eastward shift in balance of power dynamics from Euro-Atlantic. An integrated entity, it is a fusion between Indian and Pacific Oceans, and surrounding land masses. From the Western perspective, Indo-Pacific geographic space stretches from the US West Coast to India's Western shores. However, for India and Japan, Indo-Pacific framework is far broader, its expanse stretching up to Africa's Eastern seaboard.

The architecture of Indo-Pacific is still evolving, both in the strategic and economic domains, prime focus being the major sea-lanes. The concept per se has its origin in Weimar German geo politics,<sup>1</sup> revived in 2006 through Japanese initiative duly complemented by US. It was formalized in 2016-17 by the Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, wherein he laid down the vision and report titled "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy".<sup>2</sup> There are number of

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<sup>1</sup> Hansong Li, (June 04, 2021), "The "Indo-Pacific": Intellectual Origins and International Visions in Global Contexts", *Cambridge University Press*. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-intellectual-history/article/indopacific-intellectual-origins-and-international-visions-in-global-contexts/21B142B132F694349D46CAD22EA8C7CD>

<sup>2</sup> "Achieving the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Vision", *Japan Ministry of Defense's Approach*, [https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d\\_act/exc/india\\_pacific/india\\_pacific-en.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/exc/india_pacific/india_pacific-en.html)

major economies located in the Indo-Pacific, including US, India, Japan, Australia and ASEAN group. The region accounts for 65 percent of world population, 63 percent of global GDP and 46 percent of world merchandise trade.<sup>3</sup>

It was in 2013 that Australia in its White Paper identified Indo-Pacific as a new theatre in pursuit of a robust security strategy. In 2018, Indian PM Modi at the Shangri la Dialogue spelt out nation's vision of Indo-Pacific; embracing all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity. Hence, the partnership between India and Australia in the realm of Indo-Pacific is driven by their shared vision, recognition of significance this region as a global geo political- economic center. Besides, there is high degree of convergence in their national interests, which encompass common values, maintaining regional stability, promoting free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, adhering to rule-based international order while being resilient to coercion. Geographic proximity to crucial 'Sea Lanes of Communications' (SLOCs) and region's security dynamics have contributed towards strengthening Indo- Australian partnership.

Over the years, New Delhi and Canberra have deepened their economic connection. In 2020, the strategic partnership between the two countries was elevated to 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'. An array of institutional mechanism has been put in place to promote bilateral cooperation. In 2022, two nations signed 'Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement.' The bilateral trade reached \$ 27.5 billion in 2022, and expected to realize target of \$ 45-50 billion by 2035.<sup>4</sup>

Both countries have pledged to conclude a comprehensive trade deal by the end of 2023, seeking to expand engagement in the fields such as agriculture, critical minerals, mobility, education, sports, space and defence & technology.

In the security domain, critical areas of focus include alignment of geo strategic goals, marine and cyber security, counter terrorism, defence

<sup>3</sup> Ambar Kumar Ghosh. Debosmita Sarkar. Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, (February 25, 2022,) "Security, Economy, and Ecology: Setting Priorities for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", *Observer Research Foundation* (ORF). [https://www.orfonline.org/research/security-economy-and-ecology/#\\_edn5](https://www.orfonline.org/research/security-economy-and-ecology/#_edn5)

<sup>4</sup> "India Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement: A Win-Win for India and Australia", (January 08, 2023) *Ministry of Commerce & Industry*. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1889525>

cooperation including joint military exercises and exchange of strategic information. India and Australia have also been exploring opportunities for cooperation in regional connectivity and supporting transparent and sustainable infrastructure projects especially in the Indo-Pacific. Some of the specific areas of maritime outlook between the two strategic partners are enumerated in the succeeding paras.

### **Maritime Outlook-Salient Facets**

#### ***Cooperation and Challenges-Indo-Pacific***

As two key stakeholders of Indo-Pacific Region (IPR), India and Australia have reiterated their commitment to promoting peace and prosperity in the region, crucial for the world at large. They have a common interest in ensuring freedom of navigation and overflights in the area, besides maintaining open, safe and conducive SLOCs. Both nations are committed to honour the ‘United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea’ (UNCLOS) as also other international laws and standards. India and Australia have overlapping concerns about strategic, security and environmental challenges in the Indo-Pacific maritime space. These include maritime-related activities that violate international laws- such as terrorism, piracy, drug and weapon smuggling, irregular migration, human trafficking, marine species robbing, and illegal fishing. Environmental issues include marine pollution, climate change, ocean acidification, shortage of potable water, loss of habitat due to storm surges and saline water intrusion. Key initiatives to address these challenges include high-level meetings between the two Governments, Australia-India Maritime Dialogue and ‘Navy-to-Navy’ staff meetings as part of the institutionalized mechanism.<sup>5</sup>

Given the mutual interest in improving maritime security and safety, India and Australia are keen to expand intelligence sharing between their respective navies in order to strengthen marine domain awareness, throughout the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, both nations are engaged to improve collaboration between their respective coast guards and law enforcement agencies in civil maritime

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<sup>5</sup> “Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Between The Republic of India and the Government of Australia”, (June 04, 2020), *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/india/joint-declaration-shared-vision-maritime-cooperation-indo-pacific-between-republic-india-and-government-australia>

domain. Given the importance of crucial sea trade routes and resources, both India and Australia seek to assert their interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in view of China's expanding influence in the area. China's maritime activities and infrastructure development in the Indian Ocean, especially the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), have raised concerns for both countries, leading to closer cooperation to manage and balance out China's influence. Piracy and marine security are issues that the region is dealing with, especially with respect to China.<sup>6</sup>

The IOR is home to significant marine resources, including fisheries and hydrocarbons. Managing these resources sustainably, avoiding degradation due to over exploitation is a common challenge for India and Australia. Rising sea levels, ocean warming and deterioration of environment pose threats to coastal areas of both countries. There are contentious maritime claims and legal disputes created by China, which could lead to tensions. Quad as a group can be a facilitator to address such challenges, details covered subsequently in the paper.

### **Addressing the Voids in Indo-Pacific**

In order to strengthen regional architecture in the wake of Chinese growing arrogance in the region, India and Australia are seeking to cooperate bilaterally, regionally and multilaterally through mini lateral agreements. Realizing the centrality of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific for maritime cooperation, India and Australia have committed to scale up their engagement in fora like the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus, Indian Ocean Rim Association, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, Indian Ocean Tuna Commission and International Maritime Organization.<sup>7</sup>

Addressing the capacity issues faced by 'Pacific Island Nations' (PINs) by way of marine security is indeed crucial. The strategic horizon of India,

<sup>6</sup> "Quad to curb China's illegal fishing in Indo-Pacific", *ANI*, August 20, 2022. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/quad-to-curb-chinas-illegal-fishing-in-indo-pacific-20220820133144/>

<sup>7</sup> "Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Between The Republic of India and the Government of Australia", (June 04, 2020) *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/india/joint-declaration-shared-vision-maritime-cooperation-indo-pacific-between-republic-india-and-government-australia>

however, does not extend to this region and Delhi has not been able to mobilize resources even towards the Western Pacific despite the “Act East” policy. To counteract Chinese predominance in the region, it is crucial to strengthen the capacity of the nations of Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. India has requisite expertise in dealing with marine security risks with the help of surveillance equipment; such as shore-based radars, automatic identification system transponders and satellite-based surveillance systems; all of which provided in aid to Indian Ocean countries and PINs who are highly vulnerable.

Australia too has maintained a long-term commitment in aiding PINs, particularly through security cooperation that covers the entire spectrum, from defence to human dimensions. While there are numerous programs running simultaneously, India and Australia can easily work together in specific areas to make meaningful contribution. One such area could be incorporation of naval personnel from Indo-Pacific Island nations as observers during bilateral and multilateral exercises like AUSINDEX and Malabar, which can potentially increase the operational exposure of the participants.

### **Leveraging Quad**

Quad-the Quadrilateral- is a strategic forum comprising Australia, India, Japan and US. It aims to promote regional security, economic growth and cooperation in the IPR. The group also serves as a platform for all the four nations to coordinate various issues including maritime security. Both India and Australia play a crucial role in maintaining geo- political balance in the region. While India’s military capabilities and vast experience in dealing with security in the IOR enhance Quad’s collective security efforts, Australia, as a close ally of U.S. and member of AUKUS (Australia, UK and US alliance) strengthens Quad’s overall deterrence capacity.

In order to strengthen Indo-Australian cooperation in the IPR, the “Quad Security Dialogue” can play a crucial role. The “Indo-Pacific Partnership for marine Domain Awareness”, an initiative of the Quad aims to aid states in the region to prevent illicit marine activity.<sup>8</sup> The Quad accomplishes this by offering satellite information on ship movements wherein cross-referencing of the

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<sup>8</sup> “Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness”, *Australian Government- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/quad-leaders-summit-2023/indo-pacific-partnership-maritime-domain-awareness>

inputs with data from Automated Identification Systems (AIS) is possible. As many illicit fishing boats purposefully turn off their AIS, the given satellite data opens up new opportunities for locating and seizing these boats. Thus, it can safeguard the interest of small countries in the region.

Quad plays a crucial role in ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific international waters. Deeper engagement of Quad with regional multilateral forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit will effectively thwart Chinese hostile design and promote diplomatic cooperation as also ‘confidence-building measures’ among the regional actors. This will foster regional stability and prosperity by addressing various security and economic challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

First ever Malabar- joint naval exercise under Quad where Australia participated was in the year 2007 in Bay of Bengal. However, after China’s protest over the exercise, Australia withdrew itself from future joint training of this nature. The underlying reason was China’s emergence as a major trading partner and largest export destination for Australian goods. However, after one and half decades, Australia made a comeback and has hosted ‘27<sup>th</sup> iteration of Malabar series’ in Sydney from August 11<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>th</sup>, 2023. It sends a clear message to China about its growing threat. Regular conducts of Malabar Exercises and naval patrols will go a long way to uphold international maritime laws and prevent attempts to control these waters.

### **Safeguarding Marine Ecology**

In this framework, India and Australia are collaborating closely to create the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), which Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced at the 14<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit on November 4, 2020 in Bangkok. This initiative will enhance management of shared oceanic domains in crucial areas of cooperation like protecting the maritime ecology and lessening the effects of marine pollution (especially plastics), ensuring maritime security, sustainable use of marine resources, capacity building and resource sharing, disaster risk reduction and management, cooperation in science & technology and academic fields as well as trade, connectivity and maritime transport.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Australia-India Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative Partnership: Grant Round 2”, *Australian High Commission*, New Delhi, <https://india.highcommission.gov.au/ndli/AIIP1.html>

Both nations are mutually committed to safeguard the Indo-Pacific marine environment and minimize the effects of marine pollution, particularly plastics, and climate change as both value ensuring the sustainable use of living and non-living marine resources in the region in accordance with international law. Australia's expertise in environmental and climate-related issues can significantly contribute to Quad's efforts to address challenges such as climate change and environment protection in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Soft Diplomacy**

The India -Australia relationship is built on People- to -people connect, identified in the "India Economic Strategy-2035" as the most significant asset of all. It also contributes significantly to the maritime cooperation. Both nations seek to project their power and influence through people, society and culture. Higher education has emerged as an important linkage between the two countries as Australia is keen to reduce dependence on the Chinese students. As of 2022, around 96,000 Indian students enrolled in the Australian universities.<sup>10</sup> Deakin University has established its first overseas campus in India.

Besides education, tourism and cultural interactions play a vital role in enhancing better understanding between the societies as also augment the bilateral cooperation. Sports, particularly cricket being the shared passion between the two nations is major factor contributing to the strengthening cultural bond between the two people. In 2022, around 3.7 lakh Indians visited Australia<sup>11</sup> while over 33,864 Australian visited India by the end of 2021.<sup>12</sup> Around 675,658 strong Indian diaspora forms 2.8 percent of Australian population.<sup>13</sup> The two communities play an important role in strengthening

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<sup>10</sup> Jagriti Chandra, "Indians set to become Australia's largest group of foreign students", (October 13, 2022). *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indians-set-to-become-its-largest-group-of-foreign-students-in-australia/article66001688.ece>

<sup>11</sup> "India Tourism Statistics at a Glance – 2023", (July 2023) *GOI Ministry of Tourism*, New Delhi. <https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-07/India%20Tourism%20Statistics%20at%20a%20glance%202023%20-%20English%20version.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> "India Tourism Statistics 2022", (September 2022.) *GOI Ministry of Tourism*, New Delhi <https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-01/India%20Tourism%20Statistics%20English%202022%20%28Revise%29%20%281%29.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> "Australia's Indian Diaspora: A National Asset Mapping The Community's Reach Into The Australia-India Economic Relationship", (March 2022). *Australian Government-Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, [https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australias\\_indian\\_diaspora\\_220317\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australias_indian_diaspora_220317_full_report.pdf)

the bilateral ties and promote cultural diplomacy; an important component of soft power.

### **Conclusion**

Indo-Pacific emergence as a new geographic space is a strategic reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As part of the rebalancing process, there is marked shift in global economic and military power towards this region. This has resulted in reshaping the geo- political contours of the new international order, hugely impacting socio- economic and maritime environment in tangible manner across the spectrum. As part of Quad, India and Australia are important stake holders in the Indo-Pacific and duly complement the unique strength of the other two partners -US and Japan- thus ensuring stability and strategic equilibrium in the region.

India-Australia strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific is based on their commitment to the shared values and national interests. Their maritime outlook in the Indo-Pacific reflects collective vision and cooperation in various domains, besides serving as a bulwark in ensuring peace and security in the region. It also offers opportunities for fostering mutual growth and enhancing respective roles on the global stage. The strategic partnership between India and Australia in the Indo-Pacific is aimed at advancing the cause of secure, stable and prosperous region in the long-term perspective. The collaboration is all encompassing, beyond defence and security paradigm to include economic, diplomatic cultural and cultural dimensions; hugely contributing to the Indo-Australian maritime outlook.

